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MORAL COURAGE

A SERMON PREACHED IN MARQUAND CHAPEL ON SUNDAY MORNING NOVEMBER 5, 1893

BY

JAMES O. MURRAY, D.D.
DEAN OF THE COLLEGE

PRINTED BY REQUEST OF THE FACULTY AND SENIOR CLASS

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Daniel vi: 10. "*Now when Daniel knew that the writing was signed, he went into his house; and, his windows being open in his chamber toward Jerusalem, he kneeled upon his knees three times a day, and prayed, and gave thanks before his God, as he did aforetime.*"

A virtue in action always impresses us more deeply than the same virtue described eloquently or demanded in a code of morals imperatively. "The law of the Lord is perfect." We give instant and full assent to this truth. We admire the moral perfection. But when in the life of Jesus Christ we see perfect righteousness living and moving among men, speaking their language, mingling in their society, toiling, suffering, dying, we are moved as no abstract conception of righteousness could possibly move us. "The Good Shepherd giveth his life for the sheep." We catch these words as they fall from the lips of the Great Master only to feel their force and beauty. But when we read in the story of the gospels how the Good Shepherd *gave his life* for the sheep, then for the first time we catch the fulness of glorious meaning there may be in a self-sacrifice.

In the text we have in action a virtue which has about it something of regal air and port. It is moral courage, moral courage displayed under great allurements to temporizing expedients, or cowardly abandonments of convictions. The story may be simply and briefly told. From the position of a Jewish captive in Babylon, Daniel had risen to be second in power to the king. He had become the object of the bitterest enmity. A cabal was formed against him. It was of immense power so far as

numbers and influence could go. But the simple truth was that so long as Daniel and Darius stood together they were more than a match for all the cabals that ever could arise or enmity join together. There was an ingenious plan to divide the two, and it succeeded. Darius was persuaded to make the following decree, "that whosoever shall ask a petition of any god or man for thirty days, save of thee, O King, he shall be cast into the den of lions." The decree was signed. How often in history have rulers been made miserable tools by their subordinate officials! The decree was signed and proclaimed. Of course it came to the ears of Daniel. His enemies, be sure, took good care it should. He knew its purpose. He foresaw its consequences. What courses of action were open to him?

1. He might have said, "Well, since it has come to this—my position at court or my religion—I will not disobey the decree. I will give in my adhesion to the royal mandate. I will secure my position, and letting religion take care of itself, jump the life to come." That is, he might have apostatized. So many men since his day, have apostatized in the face of less barbarous alternatives.

2. He might have said, "Since prayer is not confined to times of day or forms of observance, since I can pray sitting or walking, in secret as well as in public, I will so pay my devotions as to give my adversaries no proof of my disobedience to the mandate of Darius." So he would have temporized, would have tried to serve God and mammon.

3. Or, he might have said, "The decree expires by limitation in thirty days. It is of far more consequence for true religion that I hold my place at the head of the nation, than anything else in my power. I will cease praying for thirty days. Then my lips can be opened in

redoubled prayers." He might thus have played the Jesuit, doing evil that good might come. Or,

4. He might have said, "I will pray as I have prayed, with windows open in the chamber towards Jerusalem, kneeling on my knees in sight of all Babylon, if all Babylon wishes to see me, three times every day will I pray and give thanks before my God, as aforetimes." It was as you know, the last course named, which he adopted, and which has lifted him to a place among the moral heroes of the race. And if we are to make a study of moral courage there is nothing on inspired pages which can present it in clearer or more fascinating light. It is not a dreamy abstraction. It is virtue in action, and in such action that we can see what the whole thing means. This study of moral courage I propose to make with you this morning. What then is this virtue? In what is it rooted? Some analysis is needed alike for clearness and force of moral impression.

Obviously then it must have for its principal element *faith in righteousness*. That this is no empty truism is evident from the fact that many men believe in righteousness only so far as it is respectable or useful. How else can you account for so starveling and false a proverb as that honesty is the best policy. Honesty is often the worst policy so far as popularity or even a temporary or worldly success may go. All moral courage worthy the name is formed in the belief that righteousness has some fixed and absolute standard. That standard is God's revealed will. The moment it assumes to human view any other shape, it no longer seems a thing worth contending for. It will not have content enough to appeal to this high quality of manhood, courage. On the view that righteousness is no mere thing of to-day or yesterday, no mere accretion of human experience touching elements of

life, but something embodied in an all holy and infinite personal will and eternally linked with an infinite goodness, it becomes to human view, what must appeal to everything in man noblest and strongest, for its assertion and vindication. Moral courage then finds an object grander than all else besides in human life. The range is so wide, the interests so deep. Certain it is that all the moral heroes of the world have had this simple and sublime faith in righteousness. They may not always have accepted our evangelical system as the very heart and core of christianity. They may have been adherents of Deistical beliefs. But they believed in righteousness as something fixed and absolute. They believed in a plan of God, that human life at its deepest, at its central point, is a moral system, over which this righteous law broods, as the blue heaven broods over the solid earth.

Nay, the faith in righteousness which gives a broad and solid footing for moral courage must hold it to be *the supreme element in life*. Logically this follows of course from the former view. But it must take possession of the man's heart as well as his understanding if he is to be morally brave in the surely coming conflicts of life. For you can find men bold enough in resisting certain forms of evil. Plenty of gamblers in the stock-market will be bold in resisting communism. Plenty of young men who give way to sinful passions would join a crusade against cruelty. Righteousness in such cases is not the supreme thing in life. It is fragmentary, partial. It does not

"See life steadily and see it whole."

And their moral courage is therefore a fraction. Change circumstances and they would not be bold in attacking evils which they *now* attack, and attack not because

righteousness, the whole rounded element of life, is supreme, but because sometimes they may

"Compound for sins they are inclined to"

by an assault upon others which have no fascination. They may even plume themselves upon this type of moral courage. They certainly throw a sop to conscience. But the faith in righteousness which makes men morally courageous, is a faith in it, as the supreme quality in life, before which ease, success, pleasure, all pale. They must believe in that righteousness which does *not* pay, which necessitating struggle, self-denial, pain and loss, is yet the supreme thing in life.

Moral courage reaches, however, a fuller proportion and a sturdier grasp when it is planted also on faith in a God of righteousness: in a God who by virtue of his own infinite righteousness is no unconcerned spectator in the long conflict between good and evil on the earth: in a God who is in the conflict as the ally of all good men. If for no other reason, for this, that men are often left by their fellows to fight the battles for goodness, alone. They are in the minority and it is a strong and overbearing host arrayed against them. Besides, many a conflict putting moral courage to severest tests must be fought in the man's own soul. It is a self-conquest. It is a secret struggle. There are no human spectators of the fight. Who does not know of such secret battles? Who has not known how his courage has been put to the test by the desertion of others on whom he had relied—or by the odds against him, which he knew his course would rouse? Nor is it any mark of weakness that at such times heart fails a man. "You look pale," said a subaltern to his superior officer on the eve of battle. "*You* would not be here to look pale," was the reply, "had you known as I

know what battle is." No, in such hours man needs the support of the Higher Arm. He is finite and he is human, no demi-god, no superhuman creature. It is no mark of weakness that he turns pale in the view of a moral struggle. He needs to feel that God is with him. Kaulbach in one of his Berlin frescoes has painted a battle of the Huns in which above the earthly combatants, the spirits of the air are fighting too. The fresco is a parable. No man fights his bravest in these struggles between right and wrong, till he feels that God is with him in the fight. Some men mistake moral bravado for moral courage. The former affect to despise the odds, to depreciate the bitter cost, to make light of the human weakness. Moral courage never does. It owns to the full the weakness of the arm of flesh. It shrinks from what such struggles involve. But it remembers God—as the Helper, sings with Martin Luther the 'Ein feste Burg,' believes in the God of righteousness and then takes its stand for truth and duty.

Moral courage will not gather into itself all elements of strength, until it is rooted in a faith in Jesus Christ as the Founder of a Kingdom of righteousness on earth. Moral courage in its highest form is therefore Christian courage. It is the boldness of Daniel when in sight of all Babylon and in full knowledge of the changeless nature of the arbitrary and cruel decree of Darius, he opened his windows toward Jerusalem, kneeled down and prayed the forbidden prayer. It is the courage of Joseph of Arimathea who wrote to Pilate and craved boldly the body of Jesus, when such a request marked him as the friend of the Nazarene. It is the unfaltering, uncompromising fidelity of the apostles like Peter and Paul who spoke boldly in the name of the Lord Jesus. The distinctive element in all these acts of chris-

tian boldness, is the faith that Christ has set up a kingdom on earth, for which men are bound to contend. Christ has been here in person. He entered the lists. He died on the cross. He rose again to be by virtue of his death, the Divine Head of the kingdom. Every moral principle, every holy doctrine is in that kingdom. You cannot find anything on earth worth contending for morally which is not in that kingdom. And courage rises to its full proportion only when it draws inspiration from Christ. To be on His side is the position which, as it surely precipitates conflict, also and as surely puts a man where he may feel strongest. It has been written for us in the blood of the martyrs. You can read the truth in the light of flames which curled above the heads of such men as Latimer and Ridley. The only amazing thing is that christian men are not a thousand fold bolder than they are. Faith in the kingdom of Christ and in Christ as a King, is the strongest foundation for courage, because it gives us the assurance through the holy mystery of the Incarnation, that Christ Jesus is with men, with every man in every humblest struggle for the right, he is called to engage in. So sang Frederic Faber in one of his hymns.

O blest is he to whom is given
The instinct that can tell
That God is on the field, when He
Is most invisible!

O learn to scorn the praise of men,
O learn to lose with God;
For Jesus won the world through shame
And beckons thee his road.

Muse on his patience, downcast soul,
Muse and take better heart;
Back with thine angel to the field,
Good luck shall crown thy part.

For right is right, since God is God,
And right the day must win;
To doubt would be disloyalty,
To falter would be sin.

The danger in presenting any such subject as this is, that the whole force of moral impression may be lost in a mass of general statements which everybody assents to and nobody brings home to his own business and bosom. To avoid this peril, let us next consider *the occasions* on which such a virtue as moral courage should assert itself. These, of course, always exist in the larger sphere of human life, where great issues are made up and vast interests concentrate themselves. Take for example public life as it goes on in America to-day. So absolute is the power of party control, so wholly subservient to party interests are public men, that only when an overwhelming public sentiment is generated in favor of reforming abuses, do our public men come forward to the work. Of course there are exceptions. But they only prove the rule. Our public men too often seem bold only when moral courage in the leaders has been reinforced by the force of enlightened sentiment in the people. The last virtue a mere politician wishes anything to do with is moral courage. He has no use for it. It is in his way. It might put him at odds with his party. It might insist on carrying out convictions. It might not run with the machine. And there is no sphere where this virtue is more loudly demanded than in the sphere of public life. The duty resting on all educated men at this hour is to make our statesmen feel that this is expected of them by the thinking classes. Every year the force of this educated sentiment is growing. Politicians may slur it now. But it is as sure at last to make itself, at least a balance of power in this country, as water is to find its level.

The same thing is true for many other forms of associated life. Take the church of Christ. How often it languishes for want of a few men of moral courage. Take much of what passes for business sanctioned by respectable names. The deeds that are done in the name of business transactions are such for magnitude that they seem to browbeat the christian world into silence. How long shall they go unchallenged, unrebuked! What is church discipline come to, what is it as any moral force! It tithes mint, anise and cummin. But the shameful fact exists—there is no covering it up—that church discipline is unknown in as large field of business operations, which are at war with the first principles of honesty and which defy and laugh to scorn all the sentiments of generosity, fame and honor. These are not "business."

Let us not however wander too far from ourselves, and gain credit by cheap denunciation of other's failings, when we come nearer home only to find the demand for moral courage constant and wide. Take the associated life in our colleges. What a sphere for moral courage is afforded in student life! There come to young men direct solicitations to evil, from those already corrupt. Let me speak plainly. I mean in every such associated student life as college creates, there will be found men already evil at heart, or men who with other generous and admirable qualities, are men of easy going disposition, who are the victims by turns and then the tempters. College life has its vices, extravagance, drinking, gambling, lust. I rejoice to believe that as a body of young men it is only a class, I would fain believe a very small class, to which such a charge comes home. But *you* know when and where it strikes, and I may safely leave the personal application to your own consciences and college sentiment. Here then is the occasion for moral courage in a clear, prompt,

sturdy refusal to every such solicitation to evil. I may not doubt that there has been an hour in the history of some before me since their college life here began, when such a refusal, springing from a true moral courage, would have changed the whole subsequent career, and have saved them from a bitter heritage of self-contempt. It may be only refusal to be a participant of the sin. It may not involve rebuke for the tempter, richly as such rebuke is deserved. It may be only the calm deliberate "No" which rises like a wall against persuasion. But he would be a very harsh judge and cold hearted preacher who would say, it is easy for young men to say "no" to these direct solicitations to evil dissipations. I say it does take moral courage, sometimes moral courage of very positive type. And yet it should be remembered by every young man when he is under enticement to evil courses, that such enticement always puts on a bold front, but may be after all shamefaced and skulking enough within. The dashing air of carrying all before it, as if all else was a tame and sheepish affair, is only the swagger of a moral bully. It will be cowed always by a quiet, determined refusal to enter into evil ways. The thing to be remembered by you is that one grain of true moral courage will easily outface every such temptation and tempter. Sometimes it may be the province and the duty of moral courage to go farther and give stinging rebuke to the tempter Were there more of this done it would lift our college morality to still higher planes of purity and strength. But at all events let there be a moral courage in our college life, strong enough, active enough, to let the evil minded men know that the business of seducing others to their own vile level is dastardly, and is to be banished, that the college is no hunting ground where the panders to the devil may do his work of destroying soul and body in hell.

A similar call for moral courage is made upon the professedly christian men here. First of all, to be simply and earnestly true to these christian professions. I know it to have been the occasion of bitter regret to some very true-hearted men who in years past have been with us, that during their college course christian life was with them in a condition of almost total collapse. They never identified themselves actively with the working christian element in the college. Nay, they were influential in a direction which if not the antagonist, was the suffocation of earnest christian living. And at last came the sense of recreancy to their high vocation when it was well nigh too late to redeem it. It may be that moral courage will be demanded of men to play a high christian part here. Cast off from such moral supports as are found in the churches you have left, where watchful eyes were upon you, and there was an earnest christian sentiment you deeply honored, it may be harder to be the earnest, consistent christian man. If so, then by so much the harder, by so much the more imperative the duty to summon courage equal to the hour. In many cases the battle is lost by want of boldness at the outset. To take such a step in the outset of a college career is almost decisive in the case. It is the first step which costs. But at whatever outlay of courage the man is bound to add his part to the positive christian influence in the college. The negative attitude counts only in the other direction. There is a denial of Christ before men, which finds its early and sad representative in Peter's denial in the high priest's palace.

And when professedly christian men play into the hands of a loose, demoralizing college sentiment, and for popularity cater to what they know is unworthy of the true christian manhood, the result is deplorable every way.

Religion must concern itself with morals: college religion must concern itself with college morals. No fervor in prayer meetings, no amount of christian talk can possibly make good such a deficiency in christian influence, both as to quality and degree. It will of course resolve itself into a question of courage. "Have I the moral nerve to stand for what is true and honorable, and just, and pure, and never strike my flag to what is mean and false and low?" Your christianity is just as much concerned with these questions, as with doctrines of the faith, or going to communion tables. Nay, your place at the table of the Lord may be determined as worthy or unworthy by the very answer you may give to just such home questions as these. They may test your moral courage just as sorely as the decree of Darius tried the soul of Daniel.

There is yet another responsibility of student life in such institutions as this, for the discharge of which moral courage may be demanded. It is responsibility for the creation and maintenance of a high college sentiment which shall always assert itself in favor of what is right and true, and always frown on what is reckless and disorderly and ruinous to the best interests of the college. This responsibility is not a divided one. It belongs to you. I believe it can be commended to your conscience by high considerations to which I beg your attention. Every student or graduate of a college is a beneficiary. He receives daily a bounty from the founders, who toiled to make the fortunes out of which these buildings are reared, these professorships established, these chapels built. It is perhaps among the proudest records of the christian church, that the great institutions of learning in the old world and new are the gifts of devout men who believed that learning was not only the hand-maid but the true

yoke-fellow of religion in the great work of regenerating human society. But here stands the fact, that only by the munificent liberality of such men, are you here to-day. Do not even for a moment imagine that your tuition fees represent anything like an adequate return, and dissolve all obligation on your part as beneficiaries. The per cent. of cost which fees represent is infinitesimal. When paid, they still leave every man who has received an education in college under an obligation which is too little, far too little, remembered, and which might be insisted on for other reasons than those for which I now urge its consideration. It forfeits no man's self-respect to be such a beneficiary. It detracts nothing from his independence and manliness that he is willing to accept it. But it does place him under some obligations to the founders whose benefactions he appropriates. It does make it his duty as a matter of common gratitude to see that such a public sentiment exists, as will not pervert and hinder, but promote and enlarge the sphere of the beneficent endowments. I recall to-day with the profoundest emotion of respect him—our chief founder—whose portrait looks down on us from yonder reading room. That life of hard and unsparing toil in a foreign land where the foundations of his fortune were laid, that stainless life of business integrity, that high appreciation of intelligent equipment for life's duties, that strenuous abhorrence of everything which was frivolous or base, or disorderly, that invincible repugnance to all sham, that serene love of truth and duty which made him conspicuous in every community where he was known, these qualities of this Founder, John C. Green, on whose bounty we daily live, make it incumbent on every one of us to carry out his aims in these benefactions, that the college should be the nursery not only of high learning, but of high manliness, of unstained honor abroad and

at home. And this can be done only in one way, by the raising up of a public sentiment in college, or if it exists, maintaining and re-enforcing it, which shall be the strongest bulwark of order, dignity, gentlemanliness, purity, truth, all which goes to make up the best possible college morals. *If any traditions clash with this, let them perish.*

But clearly enough before such a sentiment can be formed, what is dormant now in some minds must assert itself, what is wrong must be warred against. The good and true sentiment must assert itself more strenuously and persistently. I believe it is cowed often. I believe that the worse sentiment has been allowed sometimes to get the better of the true, through want of boldness. Here is the occasion for moral courage. And what nobler form of displaying it than in fulfilling such obligations to such founders.

A public sentiment in college vigorously asserting itself in favor of the purity and order of the college, frowning sternly upon all such gross violations of purity and order as seriously injure the college, is just as much demanded, that its legitimate work may prosperously go on. I am discussing the question this morning in its moral bearings. Much might be said as to the worth of a high and pure *morale* in our college life, for its fair fame, for advancing its interests among its competitors for public favor. I turn from all this to point out the need of such a public sentiment for the successful work of the institution. It is the right of every man coming to this college to expect, that around him should be found an atmosphere of high intellectual activity, of honorable and true gentlemanliness, of kind and cordial social fellowship, of earnest moral tone, of liberal and warm christian feeling, in which his own development may go forward, he in turn contributing

according to the divine command and pattern, "Freely ye have received, freely give." Lower the tone in this respect, make college life the arena for disorder, of outbreak, or an indolent good time, in which the intellectual is subordinated to things innocent in their place, but holding at best, in a truly ordered college life, only an incidental position, and that will be wanting which men who come here have a right to expect they will find, and for which the public holds the college responsible. We cannot grow the best men in such an atmosphere. Insensibly, if not sensibly, all will feel the enervating, if not the distracting influences of the time and place. What men need here is the stimulus gained from a society of college men which braces up earnest purpose, and sets work, hard work, at a premium. And so far as college life ministers to anything else, to low conceptions of life as a field for earnest endeavor, it is a moral failure. There is no power in or out of nature to break the connection between the indolent, *dillettante* use, the low, debasing abuse of opportunities, and moral failures. Unless you for yourselves create first the atmosphere of earnest, resolute purpose, strong to every high and worthy inspiration, you cannot fitly equip yourselves for the work of life. The loss of this is irreparable, for if a man has, in after life, simply to *recover* from the effects of his college course, his convalescence will be a costly matter to him and to his friends. And I may say once more, here comes in this question of moral courage. Will the earnest, the pure, the ennobling sentiment rule, or will it be cowed and lie prostrate before the low and unworthy? That is the question. I can not for one moment doubt that if the sentiment favoring all that is high in moral tone, in your dormitories, at worship in this chapel, in your recitation rooms, in all your representations of the college elsewhere, would

only assert itself, the air about us would be cleared of intellectual and moral miasmas. And whether it shall or not, is the question of moral courage. Will you assist this public sentiment, so that in deed and truth we may be able to say to the public and to the world, there is at least to be found in Princeton College a high tone as to every attribute of true college life? Earnest purpose, high and strong intellectual life, orderly, quiet and gentlemanly conduct, no more puerile and servile obedience to foolish traditions, but freed from all that, a genial, cordial, large-hearted fellowship of scholars united in this place of training for life-work. And this is at your doors laid as a question of moral courage.

I have spoken of the nature and occasions for this virtue. The necessity for it should point a few concluding thoughts. From what does it spring? Is it intermittent or constant? absolute or relative?

Looked at in its deepest aspect, all human life is a battlefield on which the conflict between good and evil is ever waging. Every human soul, every community, every form of organized society, the whole moral system—here is its arena. There is no escape from it. It is the inevitable condition of our existence, and must be accepted by us. You can flee from it into no monasteries, you can shun it in no solitary hermitages. It is within you as the kingdom of God is within every christian man, to become the ruler there. As the arena for struggle is universal, so the conflict is incessant. You read it in every page of history. You hear its noise and outcries above even the din of battlefields. You find it sounding the deepest note in literature, as great tragedy comes sweeping by us in the titanic woes of Lear and the titanic struggles of Macbeth. Nay, you know that it makes up the saddest and

most woful part of that vast unwritten history which only the day of judgment shall unroll before us.

The necessity for moral courage, then, absolute and unintermitting, springs from this factor of our moral condition. No good part in life can be played without it. Every profession calls for it. The life you lead here, with its occasions for this virtue, is but a type of what is to come, only in greater degree and on a larger scale. The old martyrdom has gone, its mission nobly fulfilled. But there are still, as the poets sing, martyrs by the pang without the palm.

And to this complexion does it come at last—that unless you are to smother convictions basely—unless you are to strike your flags to low standards of morals—in politics, in business, as well as in student life, unless you are to live on a low temporizing plane in christian and social life, you must fight this good fight of faith. I have spoken plainly this morning, because plain words are best, and yet more, because it seems to me no idle dream of an enthusiast or visionary that our student life the world over, may and should be lifted to higher regions and every tradition brought under foot, which is in the way of this blessed consummation; nay because I have faith enough in the young men before me to believe that they will respond to the desire, the hope, the confidence that this institution shall be a leader in this advance. And so I end my message this morning by the words of a scholar, a man of most glorious deeds, because a man of holiest and loftiest christian courage. "Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honorable, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue and if there be any praise, think on these things."